

WILLIAM DALRYMPLE'S *CITY OF DJINNS* AND THE HEGEMONIC STRATEGIES OF TRAVEL WRITING

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ABSTRACT

William Dalrymple's *City of Djinn*s (1993) won him the 1994 Thomas Cook Travel Book Award and Sunday Times Young British Writer of the year Award and established him as an engaging and entertaining travel writer with sympathetic understanding of history. This work also marks the beginning of his engagement with Mughal history, the theme revisited in his other two books *White Mughals* (2002) and *The Last Mughal* (2006). This paper will examine how Dalrymple, in spite of his larger sympathies, makes use of Oriental tropes and other western hegemonic strategies in order to negotiate history and travel. It will further argue that Dalrymple's projection of British Colonizers is much more positive than his portrayal of Mughal predecessors who are depicted as decadent, cruel and promiscuous. Dalrymple to this extent adheres to the western literary tradition where Muslim Monarchs and things eastern are often presented with negative images.

KEYWORDS: Travel Writing, Oriental Tropes, Delhi, History, Mughals, Decadence, Colonial Hegemony

INTRODUCTION

Travel writing has always played an important role in understanding distant and remote lands which can be far removed both in time and space; it has the power to recreate moments from the past as well as the present. Human fascination to know the 'other' has always motivated travelers and writers to explore new lands and to write travel accounts of their journeys. Lisle Debbie in her work *The Global Politics of Contemporary Travel Writing*; writes:

All travelogues are based on a journey metaphor that expresses the common affliction of wanderlust – the need to go elsewhere.... Since the beginning of written and recorded history, the journey metaphor has been central to the way peoples and cultures locate themselves and tell stories about the world they are living in. (Lisle: 36)

William Dalrymple is one such best selling travel writer who brings to his readers an interesting slice of Delhi's history through his travelogue, *City of Djinn*s (1993). The book takes its readers on a journey down the memory lane where one not only encounters scenes from recent past in the history of Delhi (where Delhi epitomizes the heart of India and reflects the Indian identity at large) but also gets glimpses of historical events which took place in remote past. Dalrymple makes insightful observations about Delhi's present as well as the past history. *City of Djinn*s is the result of Dalrymple's research and stay in the historic city of Delhi. When he landed up in this city he was a newly married young man and was accompanied by his wife Olivia Fraser. In the very prologue to the book Dalrymple celebrates the unique characteristic of this city – the quality of rising back to life from its own ashes like a phoenix. Delhi has been visualized as a city which refuses to get annihilated and redefines itself after each phase of destruction. Here it seems Dalrymple is echoing the

sentiments of Ahmed Ali –the novelist who immortalized Delhi in his book *Twilight in Delhi* – who even finds mention in his *City of Djinns*. Both Dalrymple and Ahmed Ali make use of motifs of decadence and ruin in order to describe Delhi:

Yet ruin has descended upon its monuments and buildings, upon its
boulevards and by-lanes under the tired and dim stars the city looks deathly
and dark the kerosene lamps no doubt light its streets and lanes; but they are
not enough, as are not enough the markets and the gardens, to revive the light
that floated on the waters of the Jamuna or dwelt in the heart of the city. Like
a beaten dog it has curled its tail between its legs, and lies lifeless in the night
as an acknowledgment of defeat (*Twilight in Delhi*: 5-6)

Both the writers strategically make use of nostalgia but with a difference, while Dalrymple is glorifying the colonial past of Delhi, Ali on the other hand holds the British responsible for the untimely ruin of the city.

City of Djinns moves freely from the present to the past and from personal experiences to historical, cultural and mythical. The prologue gives an idea of things to come and also provides the reader with the information regarding the title of the book. Dalrymple recounts his meeting with the Sufi Pir Sadr-ud-Din who calls Delhi as the City of djinns and it is because of the love of the djinns for this city that it can never be deserted. The Pir further informs him that one can still feel the presence of the djinns in every nook and corner of the city. This book is in fact a backward journey in the history and culture of Delhi – a journey into the Orient with tales of Sufi's and Djinns, decadent emperors with their harems and courtesans; beautiful Oriental women and fights of partridges. Delhi has been shown as a land of heat and dust, a land which has been improved and civilized by the British Raj. Dalrymple describes it as a city of contradictions and once he establishes his fascination and his love for the same he gets the authority to unfold the city like an Orientalist:

Delhi, it seemed at first, was full of riches and horrors: it was a labyrinth,
a city of palaces, an open gutter, filtered light through a filigree lattice, a
landscape of domes, an anarchy, a press of people, a choke of fumes, a whiff
of spices (*City of Djinns*: 7-8)

Understanding the ambiguous and paradoxical role of travel and celebrity culture; Robert Clarke observes:

Modern Western travel culture, like celebrity, it could be said, has played a
dubious role in the development of capitalist democratic cultures, as a force
and symbol of enfranchisement and liberation, on the one hand, and equally
of containment and exploitation, on the other In recent scholarship, travel
has been figured either as oppressive and colonizing, or as a force for
disruption, hybridity and liberation (Clarke: 145)

This very ambiguity and duality also underlines *City of Djinns* and Dalrymple himself; as a celebrity travel writer. By penning this book Dalrymple exhibits his fascination for India and particularly for Delhi but at the same time the book betrays his colonial hegemonic strategies. Dalrymple records that since independence Delhi has undergone a sea change –

Lutyen styled English bungalows with jamun and ashuphal trees have given way to high rise buildings and exposure to the western goods and comforts has also brought about the change in morality. Dalrymple writes about a sinister strain in the attitudes of people who have become less tolerant towards each other's faith. The assassination of Indira Gandhi, the late Prime Minister of India by her security personnel reveals an ugly episode in the history of independent India. The people who surround Dalrymple in the present, Mr. and Mrs. Puri, Balwinder (the taxi driver), his father Punjab Singh and his brothers are the people who give firsthand account of their harrowing experiences of those turbulent times. It is at this juncture that Dalrymple makes reference to Trilokpuri massacre:

When the outside world first discovered the Trilokpuri massacres, long after the rioters had disappeared, it was Block 32 that dominated the headlines
Dogs were found fighting over piles of purple human entrails. Charred and roasted bodies lay in great heaps in the gullies.... (31)

The violence in the recent past occasions the writer to reflect on the sad event of partition in Indian history and how it affected people on both sides of the border. With grim irony of fate Dalrymple records the vast exodus that took place due to the division of this country on the basis of religion:

It was the greatest migration the modern world had ever seen. Yet again Delhi was consigned to the flames. Following some of the worst rioting in its history, nearly half of its ancient Muslim population – the descendents of the people who had erected the Qutub Minar and lined the streets to cheer the Great Mughal – packed their bags and headed off to a new country. Their place was taken by refugees from the Western Punjab, among them Mr. Puri, Mrs. Puri and Punjab Singh Delhi was transformed from a small administrative capital of 900,000 people to a Punjabi -speaking metropolis half the size of London (36)

Balwinder Singh recounts how he too was displaced from his house and how he landed in Delhi, a city of immense possibilities and opportunities, a city of new dreams – got enamored by beautiful cars in the city and took to the profession of a taxi driver. The author talks about the warmth and hospitality of Indian people but in the very next moment he ponders over these horrific acts of violence that desecrated the Indian soil and thus with a master stroke he is able to convey that this goodness is a façade and that these very same humble and docile creatures can give themselves up to most barbarous acts of violence.

*City of Djinn*s is a curious mix of travel and history. It is Dalrymple's stay in Delhi and his fascination for the city which leads him to search for its history. Dalrymple peoples his travelogue with interesting characters from the present and authenticates his writing by noting down his rendezvous with the Indian bureaucracy:

I left Mr. Lal's office at noon. By four-thirty I had queued inside a total of nine different offices, waiting in each for the magic letter, seal, signature, counter-signature, demand note, restoration order or receipt which would, at

some stage in the far distant future, lead to my being granted a telephone.

(pg22)

Dalrymple makes it amply clear that Indians are incapable of good administration and things have changed for the worst since the British left the Indian soil. This change has been described not only through some visible physical markers but also through psychological play of certain events and anecdotes. The seeds of this journey were sown even before Dalrymple landed up in India, when in fact he went to Cambridge to meet Iris Portal who had spent her youth in Delhi during the days of British Raj. This betrays Dalrymple's nostalgia for the colonial past. He is able to create an aura and glory around Lutyen's Delhi and is able to convey in a subtle manner that the British were a civilizing force who contributed to the making of modern India by bringing about great many reforms and by constructing beautiful buildings. Dalrymple does not stop here and puts forward a well meaning question to Iris 'Do you think British rule was justified?' To this Iris reiterates the sacrifices that have been made by the British and further adds:

'But on balance I think you must never take land away from the people. A people's land has mystique. You can go and possibly order them about for a bit, perhaps introduce some new ideas, build a few good buildings, but then in the end you must go away and die in Cheltenham.' (80)

*City of Djinn*s engages itself with the history and architecture of numerous building in and around Delhi. Particular mention has been made to the tomb of Safdurjung, as the last great Mughal structure of the seventeenth century. The glory and the ruin of the Mughal era are recounted in the same breadth, the ruin which was accelerated by the plundering of Nadir Shah. Decay and decadence is portrayed through the architectural ruin of the tomb:

Like some elderly courtesan, the tomb tries to mask its imperfections beneath thick layers of make-up; its excesses of ornament are worn like over applied rouge...
...The building tells a story of drunken laughter as the pillars of empire collapsed in a cloud of dust and masonry; and afterwards, of dancing in the ruins (158-159)

It is important to take notice of the decadent imagery that has been used to describe the tomb and the times to which it belongs. The comparison of the tomb to an aging courtesan can be out rightly outrageous and shows Dalrymple's complete submission to Oriental tropes. In his much celebrated book *Orientalism*, Edward said enumerates:

Orientalism is premised on exteriority, that is, on the fact that Orientalist, poet or scholar, makes the Orient speak, describes the Orient, renders its mysteries plain for and to the west (Said, 20-21)

Old Delhi which stands for the Mughal past is the symbol of decadence, ruin and closed spaces. As opposed to this, Lutyen's Delhi is associated with all the positive images of grandeur, openness and permanence. New Delhi for Dalrymple is the planned city of the British with its cool shades and avenues:

To best appreciate New Delhi I used to walk to it from the Old City. Leaving

behind the press and confusion of Shahjehanabad – the noise and the heat, the rickshaws and the barrow-boys, the incense and the sewer-stink – I would find myself suddenly in a gridiron of wide avenues and open boulevards, a scheme as ordered and inevitable as a Bach fugue Suddenly the roads would be empty and the air clean. There was no dust, no heat: all was shade, green and cool. (81)

Throughout the book Dalrymple proceeds in a way by which he can capture the imagination of his readers. He supplants history with lores and anecdotes which actively work to reconstruct our opinions about the British and the Mughals as well. Thus he effectively feeds his readers with the information which creates a positive view of the British colonizers and a negative image of the Mughal presence in India. Debbie Lisle argues “that the hegemonic discourses of difference that arose during colonial rule continue to anchor contemporary narratives about travel” (Lisle: 277). Working on these lines Dalrymple also effectively establishes the western hegemony by establishing the inherent differences between the English West and the Indian East; be it in architecture, governance, culture, behavior and moral codes of the two. Following the tradition of western Orientalists; Dalrymple without being directly judgmental portrays Muslim Mughals as promiscuous, cruel and incestuous. Repeated references have been made in the travelogue; through the use of anecdotes and by quoting ‘fanciful speculations’ by Western travelers like Manucci and Bernier regarding Shah Jehan’s fondness for her eldest daughter Jahanara Begum, that the great Mughal emperor nurtured incestuous desire for his eldest daughter :

Many contemporary writers comment on Shah Jehan’s legendary appetites:
the Emperor’s lust for his daughter Jahanara, his penchant for seducing the
wives of his generals and relations, and the numbers of courtesans invited
into the palace to quench the monarch’s thirst when his expansive harem proved insufficient (231)

Fluctuating between the historical past and the present of Delhi, Dalrymple describes his various visits to the shrine of Sufi Saint Nizamuddin Aulia and to the Jama Masjid on the occasion of Eid namaz. Dr. Jaffery a resident of Old Delhi is his guide during most of these explorations. Dalrymple’s one year in Delhi also covers the holy month of Ramadan when he was invited for Iftar by Dr. Jaffery and the ‘magnificent view’ that he got of Old Delhi from the rooftop gives him space to talk about kite fliers and pigeon fliers (kabooter baz) – a complete picture of the Orient from the western eye and for the western eye.

Moving further back into the history of Delhi, the author takes his readers for a journey into 14th Century when the Moroccan traveler Ibn Batuta arrived at Delhi and got appointed to the post of Qazi by Sultan Muhammad Bin Tughlak. Tughlak has been described as a cruel, ruthless and cynical Monarch. In his cynicism he ordered his capital to be immediately shifted to Daulatabad which was seven hundred miles to the south. This insensitive and illogical order was a doom for Delhi and its populace:

Delhi was left like a paradise without its houris and its houses were reduced
to the abode of djinns Later, it was all set on fire (295)

Dalrymple closes his book by devoting only a few pages to the ancient history of Delhi and this is where he brings

the great Hindu epic *Mahabharata* into focus. This was the time when Delhi was the Indraprastha –the great capital of the Pandavas which the author calls as ‘the Indian Troy’ (323), was unparalleled in its grandeur and was termed as ‘a new heaven’ by Vyasa. The book ends with Dalrymple and Olivia’s visit to Nigambodh Ghat and the hot Indian summer giving way to pleasant monsoon showers. Dalrymple’s *City of Djinnns* concludes on a note of celebration and reverence for India’s ancient Hindu past.

CONCLUSION

Dalrymple’s immense popularity as a travel writer lies in the nostalgic and Orientalist representation of India. The author succumbs to the common prejudices and misconceptions which are often attributed to Muslims and the east and also makes effective use of western hegemonic strategies in *City of Djinnns*. Dalrymple is writing constantly with the baggage of the colonizer and hence wittingly or unwittingly lands up comparing the Mughal India with the British and in the process establishing the supremacy of the later over the former. Despite the use of Orientalist tropes the book gives a remarkable insight into the history and culture of the city and also broadens the understanding of the reader about the enigma that is Delhi.

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